RI Water Resources Board – Water Allocation Project
Impact Analysis Subcommittee

Preliminary Recommendations

Preliminary Findings:

- Water is inexpensive in RI compared to the U.S. average and to water's full economic value. Protecting environmental assets and quality of place are more important than low-cost water or unregulated growth.

- RI is the second most densely developed of the 50 states. Our remaining un-fragmented forests and productive waters are therefore more precious to our well-being.

- Policy levers available to preserve water while optimizing impacts of its use include: land-use management, water conservation, water re-use, and the expansion of supply capacity. Of these, land–use regulation and the capacity to cut water use during times of scarcity are the most critical.

- Technology offers the potential to do more with less water, but water conservation alone will not mitigate the risks of environmental impacts in the absence of a land-use regulatory framework that takes into account water availability.

- It is possible that no one will address long-term water use priorities because of fragmentation of authority and under-investment in information systems to understand, model, and monitor water systems.

Critical Concerns:

- The quantity and location of water supply and demand depend more on municipal land-use planning than on any other factor. However, municipalities lack the information and resources to effectively protect their long-term water resource interests. They are further distracted with the fiscal stresses of rapid growth and other pressing local issues. Absent local land-use regulations that make sense in the context of available water resources, no amount of conservation effort or supply system expansion can assure long-term water availability, especially on a statewide basis.

  There is a need for state-level leadership to bring communities together for a number of cross-jurisdictional planning tasks with regard to water use. The rural communities where growth pressures are greatest are least equipped to invest in adequate water-use planning and the consequent revision of their land-use regulations and zoning ordinances. They need extensive technical assistance to understand and interpret the results of basin studies, build-out analysis and other large-scale, long-term studies.

- Water flow in streams and productive wetlands as well as water held in groundwater aquifers is not protected from excessive withdrawals for human use. These natural resources are critical to the well-being of Rhode Islanders for a variety of reasons. Protecting productive ecosystems requires the establishment of stream flow standards for all streams, with higher minimum standards for our priority aquatic habitats. These standards need to be linked to triggers for specific actions to cut water withdrawals during low flow periods. In addition, management actions need to extend to areas served by private wells and self-suppliers as environmentally important habitats and groundwater aquifers exist in these areas.

Preliminary Recommendations

- To support the recommendations below, we advocate several kinds of information gathering and analysis to determine the environmental, social, and economic impacts of water withdrawal.

    - Water Resources Board – USGS Basin Studies
    - Enhances Stream Flow Monitoring
    - Recalculation of Safe Yield
    - Build-out Analysis & Evaluation of Alternative Regulatory Scenarios
    - US Army Corp of Engineers type Impact Modeling

- **Establish standards, priorities, and protocols to protect the natural environment.** The state must establish a process that prioritizes natural resources including habitats, wetlands, and waterways. Stream flow standards need to be adopted, with special consideration given to priority areas. Priorities must come from a participatory planning process that combines ecological knowledge and community values. Public authority to manage water demand must extend to all users.

- **State leadership in support of municipal planning.** All the recommended studies above are statewide in scope and will require leadership and funding at a state level. We feel it is important to emphasize that the recommended build out analysis also should be spearheaded and supported financially at the state-level with municipalities and regional planning organizations as partners. The Comprehensive Planning statutes and State Guide Plan already require municipalities to consider water resource issues, but the complexity of water and growth issues exceed the planning resources of many communities.

- **Demand Management.** The demand management tools available to suppliers need to be expanded to avoid scarcity. There are technologies and development practices that can significantly reduce water demand. Both large and small consumers are unlikely to adopt best practices on a large scale in the absence of a sophisticated education and technical assistance program. The demand management programs required of electric utilities are a model. Conservation pricing is a potentially effective demand management tool as well as a source of revenue for demand management programs.